



---

## MULTICULTURALISM

MORTIMER ADLER

2 OF 2

What are the instructional aims of proponents of multiculturalism in our institutions of learning, first, with respect to basic public schooling (K-12); and second, with respect to college curricula?

The multiculturalists may differ in their aims with respect to public schooling, but they all respond to the same set of facts. In the ethnically diverse and culturally heterogeneous large cities of this country, the school populations include children that come from black (or African American) homes and from white homes having families of European origin. They also include Hispanics, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, and children in families from India, Southeast Asia, and the Arabic and Iranian Near East. For some time now, educators have responded to these facts by making efforts to acquaint this diversified school population with the plurality of ethnic backgrounds and cultural differences that go into the tapestry of American society, in which all the children will participate alike as citizens when they reach the age of consent.

In the summer 1990 issue of *The American Scholar*, Professor Diane Ravitch of Teachers College, Columbia University, published an article entitled “Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures.” In it she distinguished between two forms of multiculturalism, calling the one “pluralistic” multiculturalism and the other “particularistic” multiculturalism and approving of the first while sharply disapproving of the second.

It is with the teaching of history in the public schools that she is most concerned, but one might have similar concerns about the teaching of social geography. Children should be taught history and geography so that they are made aware of the mixture of ethnic and cultural diversities that have entered into the fabric of American life. They should be made conscious of the contributions of their own forebears to this mixture and take pride in the characteristic traits of the human subgroup that they themselves represent, while at the same time recognizing that those representing other human subgroups among their classmates share the common humanity that makes them all deserving of equal status and treatment.

This applies to subjects that are themselves intrinsically transcultural because they are bodies of objectively valid knowledge, such as mathematics, the natural sciences, and their derivative technologies. The application occurs not in the teaching of these sciences as bodies of knowledge but rather in teaching the history of these sciences.

Here the children should learn that many different cultural groups, especially in antiquity, contributed to the development of mathematics, physics, and astronomy. They should be impressed with the fact that these sciences are not solely of Greek and Roman origin. Contributions to the development of mathematics and astronomy come from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India, not just Greece. Eurocentrism is thus alleviated, if not cured. Such teaching of the early developments in mathematics and natural science is not inconsistent with the present transcultural character of the disciplines themselves.

What Professor Ravitch calls “particularistic” as opposed to “pluralistic” multiculturalism is, not multiculturalism at all. It lays stress on one particular human subgroup to the exclusion from consideration of others in the mixture that constitutes our pluralistic American culture.

In educational circles, for example, a group of militant African Americans are acting as a political lobby for giving the African-American children in our schools a diet of legends about African-American origins of much, if not all, of the treasures that have, in

the past, been attributed exclusively to Western European civilization. This is intended to counteract the Eurocentrism of traditional teaching; but at the same time it ignores the fact that whatever truth can now be attributed to mathematics, the natural sciences, technology, moral philosophy, and even religion is now transcultural. It is not the private cultural property of any human subgroup.

Professor Ravitch tells us that such particularism “is unabashedly filiopietistic.” It teaches black children that the American pluralistically multicultural society in which they live

is not their own culture, even though they were born here. That American culture is “Eurocentric,” and therefore hostile to anyone whose ancestors are not European. Perhaps the most invidious implication of particularism is that racial and ethnic minorities are not and should not try to be part of American culture; it implies that American culture belongs only to those who are white and European; it implies that those who are neither white nor European are alienated from American culture by virtue of their race or ethnicity; it implies that the only culture they do belong to or can ever belong to is the culture of their ancestors, even if their families have lived in this country for generations.

**The brand of history that they espouse is one in  
which everyone is either a descendant  
of victims or oppressors.**

Professor Ravitch goes on to say that “the war on so-called Eurocentrism is intended to foster self-esteem among those who are not of European descent,” but she questions whether in fact it actually works that way; for, in her view,

the children of American society today will live their lives in a racially and culturally diverse nation, and their education should prepare them to do so...[The] particularists have no interest in extending or revising American culture; indeed, they deny that a common culture exists...[and] reject any accommodation among groups, any interactions that blur the distinct lines between them. The brand of history that they espouse is one in which everyone is either a descendant of victims or oppressors.

We turn now from the controversy at the level of public schools, between the pluralistic multiculturalists and the antipluralistic particularists, to the controversy about multiculturalism at the college level.

This controversy focuses on the books that should be a part of one’s general education. It is a dispute about the traditionally recognized canon of the monuments of Western literature in all

fields—works of mathematics and science as well as works of poetry, drama, and fiction, and also works of biography, history, philosophy, and theology. Here we are confronted with current attacks upon the canonical list of great books and the responses that those attacks have elicited.

I am involved in this controversy—as associate editor of the first edition of the *Great Books of the Western World*, published in 1952, and as editor in chief of the second, much expanded edition, published in 1990.

The second edition differed from the first in many respects: new translations, a revised *Syntopicon*, and six volumes of twentieth-century authors that did not appear in the first edition, as well as fifteen authors added in the period from Homer to Freud. As in the case of the first edition, so in the case of the second, our Editorial Board and the large group of advisers whom we consulted did not agree unanimously about the authors to be included; but in both cases there was ninety percent agreement. That, in my judgment, is all one can expect in a matter of this kind.

I would like to call attention to two things about the second edition. In writing an introductory essay, which appeared in a volume that accompanied the set, entitled *The Great Conversation*, I anticipated the controversy that the second edition of the *Great Books of the Western World* would arouse. This did not arise before. In the 1940s, when we were engaged in producing the first edition, “Euro-centric” was not current as a disapprobative term. There was no hue and cry about the absence of female authors; nor had blacks cried out for representation in the canon. In those earlier decades of this century, students and teachers in our colleges and educators in general were not concerned with multiculturalism in our educational offerings.

The second edition contains female authors, some in the nineteenth and some in the twentieth century, but no black authors; and it is still exclusively Western (i.e., European or American authors) with none from the four or five cultural traditions of the Far East.

The controversy over the desirability of multiculturalism having arisen in the late 1980s, I took account of it in my introductory essay, pointing out carefully the criteria in terms of which the authors were selected for inclusion, explaining the difference between the five hundred or so *great* works included in the set and the thousands of *good* books listed in the Recommended Readings at the end of each of the 102 chapters in *The Syntopicon*. These lists included many female and many black authors, but none still from the Far East.

These exclusions were not, and are not, invidious. The difference between *great* and *good* books is one of kind, not of degree. Good books are not “almost great” or “less than great” books. Great books are relevant to human problems in every century, not just germane to current 20th century problems. A great book requires to be read over and over, and has many meanings; a good book needs to have no more than one meaning, and it need not be read more than once.

I also explained but did not apologize for the so-called Eurocentrism of the *Great Books of the Western World* by pointing out why no authors or works from the four or five distinct cultural traditions in the Far East were included or should be included. The Western authors are engaged in a great conversation across the centuries about great ideas and issues. In the multicultural traditions of the Far East, there are, perhaps, as many as four or five great conversations about different sets of ideas, but the authors and books in these different cultural traditions do not combine these ideas in one Far Eastern tradition, nor do they participate in the great conversation that has occurred over the last twenty-five centuries in the West. There are undoubtedly great, as distinguished from good, books in all of these Far Eastern traditions.

...there is much more error or falsity in the  
intellectual and cultural tradition  
of the West than there is truth.

I did not anticipate that those who responded to the publication of the second edition by challenging its Eurocentrism or complaining about the fact that its authors were still for the most part dead white males, with few females and no blacks, would do so entirely in terms of announcements in the press of the list of included authors, and without reading my introductory essay and without knowing that a large number of female and black authors were included in the 102 lists in *The Syntopicon* of *good* books cited as readings recommended in addition to the great books included in the set, along with many other books by white males, none of them regarded as great.

I should mention one other point that is highly germane to the controversy. Many of those who criticize the traditional canon of great books and call for its rejection incorrectly suppose that its defenders claim that it is a repository of transcultural truth and nothing else. That is not the case. The editors and advisory consultants of the *Great Books of the Western World* know that there is much

more error or falsity in the intellectual and cultural tradition of the West than there is truth.

The relation of truth to error is a one-many relation; for every truth, there are many deviations from it that are false. What truth is to be found is, of course, transcultural. The multiple errors, some of them multicultural, that impinge on each truth are of great importance for the understanding of the truth. Without grappling with the errors, one's understanding of the truth that corrects them is shallow. It follows that if the truths to be found in the great books of the West are transcultural, so, too, must be the understanding of the errors, some of which will be discovered in the Far East.

I turn now from the controversy about the second edition of the *Great Books of the Western World* to the controversy that has very recently arisen concerning what books should be required reading in colleges that still have some interest in the general, as opposed to the specialized, education of their students. This controversy started at Stanford University in 1988 and has spread since then to other colleges across the country.

The public prints and the electronic media have given the controversy ample notice, and its pros and cons have been publicly debated. A desirable multiculturalism has been appealed to as the basis not only for including many recent books by female, black, and non-Western authors but also for eliminating from the required readings a large number of authors and books that have long been treasured as Western greats, especially authors and books in classical antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in modern times up to the nineteenth century.

Unquestionably among the books that have been recommended for addition, some contain recently discovered or restated truths that correct errors to be found in books of earlier centuries. If so, who could reasonably object to such additions? No one. But the same cannot be said for the recommended deletions from the list of required readings— Plato and Aristotle, for example, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Gibbon; Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy; Marcus Aurelius, Rabelais, Montaigne, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill. All of these dead white males made important contributions to the pursuit of truth, even if there was much error in their insights, their principles, or their conclusions. Why, then, should many of them, or any of them, be rejected, if their inclusion does not call for the rejection of twentieth century books written by female or black authors?

If general education is to include not just Western civilization but the other great cultures of the world in the Far East, a question still

remains. If Western civilization is included as one of many in the multicultural melange, why exclude Western authors and books long recognized as truly great for their contribution to the pursuit and understanding of truth?

It may be said, of course, that there is not enough time to include these older authors if twentieth-century authors and Far Eastern authors are also to be added to the required readings. It may be said that general education should be given up and no readings at all should be required for that purpose.

But it should not be said, as some of the proponents of multiculturalism seem to think, that truth is merely what some people assert. And that they would like to be the ones to assert what is true, or elect those who are to assert it. Or, if objective truth is held to exist somewhere, it is in natural science, but not in speculative philosophy, theology, or religion, and especially not in moral philosophy, which is concerned with questions of value—good and evil, right and wrong, what ought to be sought and done.

**What is desirable is a *restricted* cultural pluralism...but not in *any* matters that are concerned with objectively valid truth...**

For such multiculturalists, these are all held to be matters of subjective personal predilection. They are not matters of public knowledge, not even knowledge with residual doubt, but only private or individual opinion, unsupported by the weight of evidence or reasons. What is or is not desirable is, therefore, entirely a matter of taste (about which there should be no disputing), not a matter of truth which can be disputed in terms of empirical evidence and reasons.


That being the case, we are left with a question that should be embarrassing to the multiculturalists, though they are not likely to feel its pinch. When they proclaim the desirability of the multicultural, they dispute about matters that should not be disputed. What, then, can possibly be their grounds of preference? Since in their terms it cannot appeal to any relevant body of truth, what they demand in the name of multiculturalism must arise from a wish for power or a belief that their self-esteem will be somehow served.

When dispute on a basis of empirical evidence or by appeal to rational grounds is ruled out, conflicting claims can only be resolved by power politics, either by force or by dominance of a majority. In either case, it comes down to *might makes right*. That is exactly

what is happening today in the efforts of the multiculturalists to change the curriculum in the public schools and in our colleges.

Multiculturalism is cultural pluralism. In the twentieth century, pluralism has become part of the democratic ideal, opposed to the monolithic totalitarianism that is now being challenged in the Russia, and also to the equally monolithic rigidity of Islamic, Jewish, or Christian fundamentalism.

While democracy and socialism, and with them pluralism, are *ideal* in the social and economic dimensions of society, cultural pluralism is not wholly desirable in other dimensions of our life. What is desirable is a *restricted* cultural pluralism; that is, the promotion and preservation of pluralism in all matters of taste, but not in *any* matters that are concerned with objectively valid truth, either descriptive factual truth or prescriptive normative truth.

In this century, mathematics, the hard-core natural sciences, and their attendant technologies have become transcultural. What truth they have so far attained is at present acknowledged everywhere on earth. Whether or not, in the next century or in a more distant future, transcultural truth will be attained in philosophy, in the social sciences, in institutional history, and even in religion is an open question that should not be dogmatically answered by the present breed of multiculturalists whose unrestricted pluralism substitutes power or might for truth and right in the effort to control what should be taught or thought. 

---



---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

### CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.